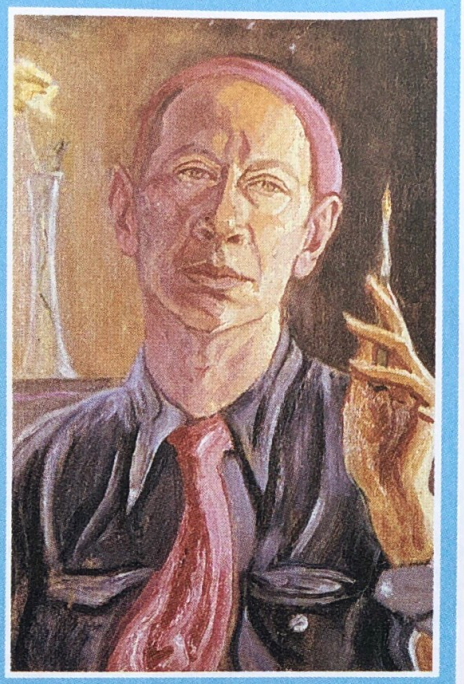
E. E. CUMMINGS



1894–1962

Although E. E. Cummings's poems tend to be very unconventional in form and style, they generally embody traditional thought. In his finest poems, Cummings explores such subjects as love and nature, while innovatively using capitalization, punctuation, and grammar to reinforce meaning.

Following the French poets Guillaume Apollinaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, who had experimented with the typography of their poetry, Cummings was a member of a group of poets within the Modernist movement who played with the visual appearance of their poems. His interest in the visual aspects of poetry may have been related to his gifts as a painter. His paintings and drawings are still shown in museums. However, the unpredictability of the printed page in a volume of Cummings's poetry also reflects his lifelong goal of upsetting the conventional expectations of his readers.

Edward Estlin Cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard and served in the French ambulance corps during World War I. In France he was unjustly imprisoned for three months in a detention camp. His experiences as a prisoner later provided him with the material for a vivid war novel, *The Enormous Room* (1922).

After the war Cummings remained in Paris to study painting but soon returned to the United States and settled in Greenwich Village in New York City. There he began working full-time as an artist, devoting time to both writing and painting. He went on to produce four volumes of poetry. While some critics attacked his unconventional style, all of his collections were well received by the general public. People responded favorably to his playful use of language and his concern with the appearance as well as the content of his poems. He also became known for his concern for the individual, his ability to recognize life's ironies, his interest in human relationships and human emotions, and his humorous approach to many of the confusing aspects of modern life.

Although his most often anthologized poems are his most sentimental ones, Cummings's best and most characteristic works are satirical in their attitude toward the world. He challenged conformity and the comfortable notions of fixed beliefs.

Cummings received a number of awards for his work, including the Boston Fine Arts Poetry Festival Award and the Bollingen Prize in Poetry. In 1968, six years after his death, a complete volume of his poetry, *The Complete Poems, 1913–1962,* was published.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

since feeling is first; anyone lived in a pretty how town; old age sticks

Writers' Techniques

Style. Style refers to the manner in which a writer puts his or her ideas into words. It involves the characteristics of a literary selection that concern form of expression rather than the thoughts conveyed. In poetry, style is determined by such factors as choice and arrangement of words, length and arrangement of lines, stanza length and format, use of punctuation and capitalization, and use of literary devices.

Because he was as concerned with the visual arrangement of his poems as he was with sound and meaning, E. E. Cummings's style is among the most distinctive of any American poet. Cummings strove to mold his poems into unconventional shapes through variations in line length and spaces between letters and lines. Frequently, Cummings used the shape of a poem to convey or reinforce its meaning. For example, his poem about a grasshopper, "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r," forms the shape of a grasshopper hopping and re-forming itself. Cummings also used capitalization and punctuation to reinforce meaning. Many of his poems contain little punctuation. As a result the few marks that are used serve to highlight important ideas. Similarly Cummings rarely used capital letters, except for emphasis. In fact Cummings even used a small *i* when his speakers referred to themselves. This reflected his perception of the self as a small part of a mass society and his belief in the need for modesty.

Commentary

Cummings's typographical games affect his poetry and the way it conveys meaning. Because Cummings breaks the rules of grammar and syntax, he draws attention to the words on the page and gives them a life of their own. As one critic put it, "the poems are made to misbehave," like individuals fighting against conventional boundaries. Each poem, alive in its own way, affirms individual emotional experience. Cummings's view of what human beings are resembled his ideas about his poetry. Both poems and people should move beyond a machinelike expression of measurable, or restrained, emotions.

Focus

"since feeling is first" focuses on the role of emotions in our lives. Freewrite about the ways in which feelings can affect our lives and why they can have such an impact.

since feeling is first

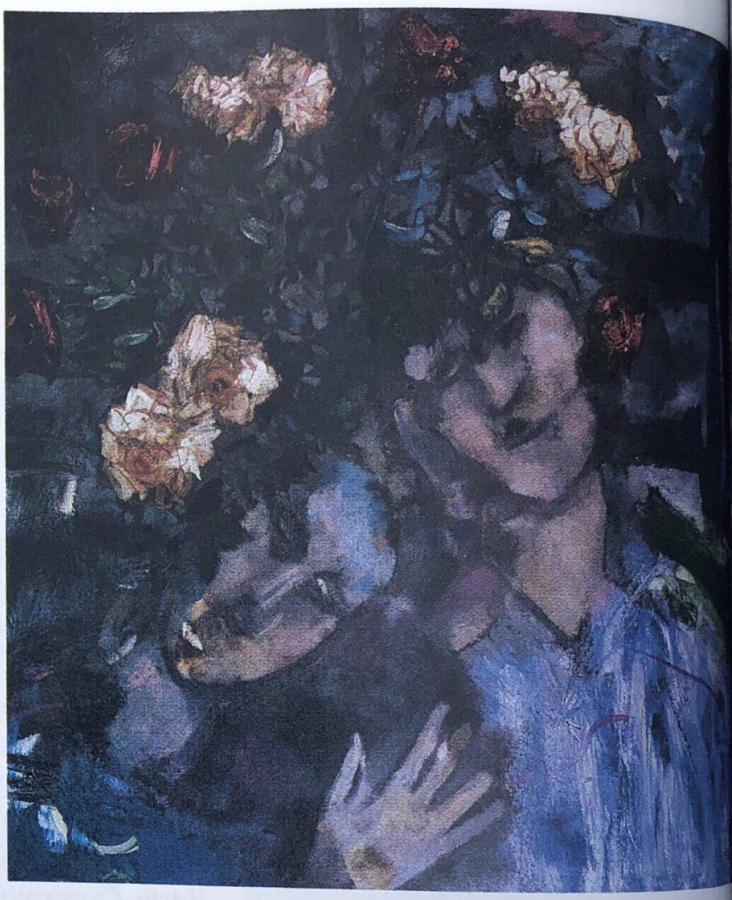
E. E. Cummings

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you:

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world
my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
—the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other: then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis



LOVERS WITH FLOWERS
Marc Chagall
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. Do you agree that "feeling is first"? Explain.
2. What do you think of the way Cummings manipulates syntax in his poem?

Interpreting

3. (a) What point does the speaker make about the relationship between reason and emotion? (b) What is his attitude concerning the role of emotions?
4. (a) What does the speaker mean when he says, "life's not a paragraph"? (b) Considering the fact that a parenthesis temporarily interrupts a sentence, what do you think the speaker means when he says, "death i think is no parenthesis"? (c) How is the speaker's perception of death related to his attitude concerning the role of emotions?

Applying

5. Do you agree with the speaker's attitude concerning the role of emotions? Why or why not?

Learning Option

Writing. Paying attention to syntax, rewrite Cummings's poem using standard capitalization, punctuation, and word usage. Then share your work with classmates. What qualities of the poem are lost in your revision?

anyone lived in a pretty how town

E. E. Cummings

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
35 reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. Did you enjoy reading this poem? Why or why not?
2. How might Cummings describe your hometown?

Recalling

3. (a) What does "anyone" sing? (b) What does he dance?
4. (a) How do "women and men" feel about "anyone"? (b) Who loves him "more by more"?
5. In the eighth stanza, what happens to "anyone"?

Interpreting

6. This poem tells about the man named "anyone" and his wife named "noone." Why do you think Cummings chose to use these names?
7. (a) What type of town is suggested by the phrase "pretty how"? (b) What type of impression does the speaker convey of the people from this town? (c) How does he convey the impression that their lives are monotonous and dull?
8. (a) What does the speaker mean when he says that the townspeople "laughed their cryings"? (b) What does he mean when he says that they "slept their dream"?
9. (a) What two lines in the poem convey the passage of time? (b) Why does Cummings vary the order of the words in these lines?

Applying

10. How might this poem be different if it were set in a large city rather than a town?

Learning Option

Speaking and Listening. Join the New York artistic scene during the 1920's. Imagine yourself in a Greenwich Village cafe and take part in a poetry reading. Share your favorite poems from the modern period with fellow writers, artists, intellectuals, and bohemians.

Primary Source

In a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1952 and 1953, Cummings commented on how he felt about the writing of poetry:

". . . so far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality . . . poetry is being, not doing. If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet's calling (and here, as always, I speak from my own totally biased and entirely personal point of view) you've got to come out of the measurable doing universe and into the immeasurable house of being. . . . Nobody else can be alive for you; nor can you be alive for anybody else. Toms can be Dicks and Dicks can be Harrys, but none of them can ever be you. There's the artist's responsibility; and the most awful responsibility on earth. If you can take it, take it—and be. If you can't, cheer up and go about other people's business; and do (or undo) till you drop."

old age sticks

E. E. Cummings

old age sticks
up Keep
Off
signs)&

youth yanks them
down(old
age
cries No

Tres)&(pas)
youth laughs
(sing
old age

scolds Forbid
den Stop
Must
n't Don't

&)youth goes
right on
gr
owing old

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. For whom do you think Cummings has greater sympathy, senior citizens or young people? Explain.
2. How would you characterize old age and youth?

Interpreting

3. How does youth contrast with old age in this poem?
4. What is ironic about the final stanza?

Applying

5. Why do you think the young and old often have very different attitudes toward life?

Analyzing Literature

Examining Style

Style refers to the way in which a writer expresses his or her thoughts. We can easily identify E. E. Cummings's poetry once we are familiar with his style.

1. How does Cummings's use of capitalization in "old age sticks" help to emphasize the contrast between youth and old age?
2. How does his use of parentheses in the poem highlight the contrast in the attitudes of the young and the old?
3. How does the shape of the poem reflect its content?

Thinking and Writing

Writing About Style

Write an essay in which you discuss how Cummings's style reinforces the meaning of his poems. Review the three poems you have just read, noting how the various elements of Cummings's style, such as his unusual use of punctuation and capitalization, reinforce the meaning of each poem. When you write your essay, use at least one passage from each of the three poems to support your argument. When you revise, make sure that you have clearly defined and thoroughly supported your thesis.